

Kennedy and the India Years: Factors Affecting JFK's Foreign Policy and Dynamic  
Relationship with India

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## **Abstract**

My project focuses on the development of the US-Indian diplomatic relationship during the term of President John F Kennedy. It specifically focuses on the Sino-Indian War of October 1962.

The central question of this research project is the following: What were the factors affecting the nature of JFK's foreign policy and dynamic relationship with India? The methodology in this research project focuses on close reading of three major primary sources: (1) the autobiography of the US ambassadors to India--primarily, John Kenneth Galbraith, (2) the US and Indian newspapers from the 1960s describing the crisis, and (3) official correspondence between the US and Indian heads of state, JFK and the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In this research paper, I suggest that (1) the influence and expertise of John Kenneth Galbraith, (2) the threat of communist China, and (3) Kennedy's complex personal relationship with Prime Minister Nehru were the major factors shaping the US-India relationship during the Kennedy term.

## **Introduction and Thesis Statement**

On October 20th, 1962, as a consequence of the border dispute between India and China, Chinese troops invaded India's Ladakh region, across the McMahon Line in the then North-East Frontier Agency.<sup>1</sup> This led to a standoff between 10,000 - 20,000 unprepared and surprised Indian troops and 80,000 strong and equipped Chinese troops. The situation was described as

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<sup>1</sup> The McMahon line is a frontier between Tibet and Assam in British India, negotiated between Tibet and Great Britain at the end of the Shimla Conference (October 1913–July 1914) and named for the chief British negotiator, Sir Henry McMahon. The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was one of the political divisions in the British Raj, and later in independent India until 20 January 1972, when it became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh and some parts of Assam.

really desperate by Indian Prime Minister Nehru<sup>2</sup> and it was said that delays in assistance would lead to nothing short of a catastrophe for the country. It was at this time that President John F. Kennedy ordered an emergency airlift of supplies for the Indian Army.<sup>3</sup> His and the then-US Ambassador to India, John Kenneth Galbraith's concern was equally divided between helping the Indians against the Chinese and keeping the peace between the Indians and the Pakistanis.<sup>4</sup>

The events of the 1962 Sino-Indian war with respect to the US-India relationship are one of the many peaks in US-India relations during the Kennedy term. Other examples of US contribution to form a cordial relationship with India include a hand in the creation of the Tarapur nuclear plant, the establishment of the Peace Corps in India, the appointment of one of the most brilliant economic minds of the 21st century- John Kenneth Galbraith- as US Ambassador to India, and a 1 billion dollar aid package. Scholars have explored the specific events that contributed to the formation of the strong relationship between the US and India. Few, however, have examined the why aspect of this relationship.

In this research paper, I suggest that (1) the influence and expertise of John Kenneth Galbraith, (2) the threat of communist China, and (3) Kennedy's complex personal relationship with Prime Minister Nehru were the major factors shaping the US-India relationship during the Kennedy term. Understanding these factors can provide a base and framework to explore US-India relations in the present and in years to come.

## **Definitions and Literature Review**

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<sup>2</sup> By Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter to President John F. Kennedy requested aid on 19th November 1962, Nehru said that "Any delay in this assistance reaching us will result in nothing short of a catastrophe for our country." Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Countries. India: Subjects: Nehru correspondence, November 1962: 11-19. JFKNSF-111-016. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

<sup>3</sup> Riedel, B (2017). *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the cia, and the sino-indian war*. Place of publication not identified: Brookings Institution Pr. .Page 26

<sup>4</sup> Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal: A personal account of the Kennedy years*. New York (N.Y.: Paragon House), Page 42815

## Definitions

The paper relies on the term positive, which is essential in describing the nature of the US-India relationship during the Kennedy term. The two countries gave each other visible support and the year 1962 can be known as a certain high point in the US-India relationship. Hence, I suggest that the diplomatic US-India relationship was a positive one, and this paper further defines and examines the relationship.

## Literature Review

Perhaps the most detailed and thorough accounts of this period can be found in the letters and diary accounts of Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith in his book *Ambassador's Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years (1969)*. He provides detailed information about the response and atmosphere during the 1962 war, describes his perspective on the Kennedy-Nehru relations, and chronicles every action of the Kennedy term with respect to India. It is an incredibly well and diligently documented journal, supplying an on-ground and primary view into US-India ties. Galbraith elaborates on the day-to-day life of an Ambassador and provides his views and intensive recounts of his meetings with various Indian and American political figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon, a former Indian defense minister. Right from his letters to Kennedy and his take on every ongoing foreign policy topic, Galbraith records it all in a professional and straightforward journal. He provides rare insight into the US's position and the on-ground action that occurred during the 1962 Sino-Indian war, which is a crucial resource for this project. However, because Galbraith was a staunch supporter of favorable US-India

relations, it is difficult to find a neutral view. There are no counterarguments to Kennedy's decisions and foreign policy regarding India.

Another highly valuable account of the personal relationship between Nehru and Kennedy comes from President Kennedy's wife, the First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy in her oral history tapes *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy* (2011).<sup>5</sup> In the chapter about India, Jacqueline Kennedy describes Nehru as being uninterested, unresponsive, and remote towards Kennedy during Kennedy's visit to India as a senator in 1951 and Nehru's state visit to the US in 1961. As Kennedy's wife and confidant, she provides an intimate perspective on this matter. Her manner of speaking is quite unfiltered because she puts forward many controversial statements in these audiotapes. Though Jacqueline Kennedy's accounts are useful to explore the personal factor of the Kennedy-Nehru relationship, there is less information about the general situation from a diplomatic and foreign policy point of view.

Among secondary sources, Ex-CIA member Bruce Riedel's book *JFK's forgotten crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War* (2015) bolsters Galbraith's account of Kennedy's strong interest in backing India.<sup>6</sup> Riedel describes the 1962 Sino-Indian war, explores the role of countries such as Tibet and Pakistan in the US-India equation, and contrasts Kennedy's diplomacy and ideals in relation to India with the presidents before and after him. Kennedy's influence on key Indian moments in history is an untouched topic. Reidel sheds light on this and brings the intricacies of US-India relations in the early 1960s forward to the public.

Dr. Richard Verma, an Indian-American lawyer and the former U.S. Ambassador to India from 2014 to 2017 explores US-India ties extensively in his dissertation, "Overcoming the

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, J., & Schlesinger, A. M. (2011). *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic conversations on life with John F. Kennedy*. (New York: Hyperion), Page 220

<sup>6</sup>Verma, Richard " Overcoming the hesitations of History: An Analysis of U.S. - India Ties " Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, (2020), Page 6

Hesitations of History: An Analysis of U.S.-India Ties”. He provides a detailed and clear overview of US-India ties since India’s independence in 1947. He proceeds to analyze a few particularly significant years in US-India history. His analysis of the year 1962, in particular, is extremely well written and provides a concise summary of US-India interactions of that period, a feature not found in other scholarly articles in the field. The main events are stated with clarity and followed by logical explanations and examples. Dr. Verma is firm on his inclusion of John Kenneth Galbraith whose contributions and role is mentioned multiple times in his analysis of US-India relations in 1962. Although Dr. Verma’s input on this period is precise and informative, it is limited, spanning little more than ten pages.

### **Data Processing and Availability**

The methodology in this research project focuses on the close reading of three major primary sources: (1) the autobiography of the US ambassadors to India--primarily, John Kenneth Galbraith, (2) the US and Indian newspapers from the 1960s describing the crisis, and (3) official correspondence between the US and Indian heads of state, President Kennedy and the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

### **Presentation of Data in support of Thesis**

The US ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith is a major influencing figure in strengthening US-Indian relations at the time. A legendary Harvard economist, Galbraith (1908-2006) published over 20 books and was arguably one of the greatest economic and political

minds of the time. He had visited India in 1956 and 1959, and developed an interest and liking for the country and the culture. Shortly after President Kennedy's win in the elections he was appointed as the US Ambassador to India and took a break of two years from his professorship at Harvard.

The Galbraith factor can be largely elaborated by instances of Galbraith's influence, power, and accomplishments as an ambassador who helped shape the US-India relationship. Galbraith first came to India exactly 50 years ago. This was at the invitation of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, whom he met at a dinner party in Geneva, hosted by their common friend, the British economist, R.F. Khan. The Indian planner, Mahalanobis, asked Galbraith to visit India and advise on the process of planning. The economist was struck by the Indian intelligence and romance with the idea of socialism.<sup>7</sup> In his memoir *A Life in our Times (1981)*, Galbraith made the statement: "When the Democrats get back in, I think I will get myself appointed ambassador to India."<sup>8</sup> Galbraith had a background in agricultural economics and was deeply interested in the agricultural sector in India, a country with booming agriculture and fertile land. He puts forward his ideas and views on the sector multiple times in the *Ambassador's Journal*. Galbraith had previously taught Kennedy as a student at Harvard, and throughout the Journal, it is clear that mutual respect is shared between the two. Throughout Galbraith's ambassadorship, he sent regular letters to the President, updating Kennedy on the situation in India, on Galbraith's own foreign policy views and ideas. It was stated in the *Ambassador's Journal* that President

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<sup>7</sup> Guha, R (2006, May 5). 'Galbraith And India' :Certainly the most imposing of all US ambassadors to India. *Telegraph India*.

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/galbraith-and-india-certainly-the-most-imposing-of-all-us-ambassadors-to-india/cid/1025091>

<sup>8</sup> Galbraith, J. K. (1981). *A life in our times: Memoirs*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Page 348

Kennedy appreciated these letters and hence it could be inferred that Galbraith had a direct ear to the President, a rare opportunity for an Ambassador. <sup>9</sup>.

Galbraith's impact on India's economic development is evident in his effort to promote Peace Corps and the establishment of power plants in various parts of the country. President Kennedy is credited to have established and implemented the Peace Corps during his term, not only in the US but worldwide. In India, the idea of the Peace Corps had to be sold to Nehru and Indian officials. Galbraith, as the US Ambassador, had a big hand in this. He had multiple meetings with Nehru and government members, introduced the Peace Corps, and promoted Sargent Shriver, the Peace Corps director. Peace Corps is a major global foundation that has created a substantial impact on India, and Galbraith's diplomatic skills and actions as Ambassador can be a factor in promoting the Peace Corps program in India. In his Journal, Galbraith stated some of his frequent duties as Ambassador included : installing small scale power plants for Indian villages, the question of financing the Bokaro Steel Plant, the possibility of a new policy for Kashmir, and intensification of the Peace Corps in India. These duties were indeed executed by Galbraith, and installations such as the Bokaro Steel Plant, Galbraith's Kashmir border policy, the Peace Corps in India still remain to this day, and are a symbol of positive US influence on India.

One of the key instances of Galbraith's influence was in implementing the state visit of the American First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy to India. During this period in 1962, the US-India relations were strained after a subpar state visit of Nehru to the US. However Jacqueline Kennedy's visit to India in 1962 altered the tensions in the US-India relations. Mrs. Kennedy,

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<sup>9</sup> President Kennedy considered publishing these letters for future use in the archive of his presidency - Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal*. Page 20 . Pearson, D (1963, January 7). 'Washington Merry-Go-Round': Former JFK Professor Guided India through Chinese War, Proves a Tower of Strength. *The Lewiston Daily Sun*. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=BBggAAAIBAJ&sjid=aGYFAAAAIBAJ&pg=817%2C513651>



widely known for her soft diplomacy, poise, and dignity, had charmed Prime Minister Nehru during their previous meeting.<sup>10</sup> She was a great patron and admirer of the arts, as was Nehru. Her presence in India, throughout which she toured the country extensively, made a positive impression on the Indian people and governmental officials. Mrs. Kennedy spent significantly more time in India than she did in the neighboring country Pakistan, which was a risky public move due to animosity between Pakistanis and Indians. Galbraith oversaw her Indian schedule and calendar. Galbraith's primary role in getting Mrs. Kennedy's visit to India improved previously strained US-Indian relations.<sup>11</sup>

Galbraith's immediate and on ground response to the Sino-Indian war was the highlight of his influence and impact as an Ambassador. In comparison to majority international ambassadors, Galbraith could be considered as overqualified.<sup>12</sup> His reputation preceded him, and he indeed lived up to his reputation in India. Galbraith had frequent meetings with Nehru, who respected him along with other Indian government officials. Hence, as the 1962 Sino-Indian war struck, Galbraith immediately initiated meetings with Nehru and Krishna Menon. At the very beginning of the conflict, Galbraith explained his stance as being a silent supporter and friend to India. He did so in the light of not receiving any further instructions from the US due to the Cuban Missile Crisis<sup>13</sup>, which was entirely occupying Washington DC during the same time. Later, Galbraith said "My concern as these pages show was equally divided between helping the Indians against the Chinese and keeping the peace between the Indians and the Pakistanis."<sup>14</sup> His

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<sup>10</sup> Nehru had a framed photograph of him strolling with Mrs. Kennedy hung in his house - Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal*, Page 212

<sup>11</sup> Riedel, B. (2017). *JFK's Forgotten Crisis* Page 96

<sup>12</sup> He was instrumental in the economic department for Franklin D Roosevelt's 'New Deal', had been a leading economist and was considered as a great mind, possessed years of experience with the US government, and was a highly popular and reputed academic.

<sup>13</sup> The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was a direct and dangerous confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and was the moment when the two superpowers came closest to nuclear conflict.

<sup>14</sup> Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal*, Page 428

concern was divided in such a manner due to the fact that the animosity between the Pakistanis and Indians could lead to Pakistan siding with China in the war, which would undoubtedly prove to be fatal for India. As the Cuban missile crisis intensified, Galbraith had no communication from Washington and had to make his own decisions. He chose to publicly speak out in support of India. An ambassador having the confidence and presence of mind to make such a crucial decision independently is an important part of Galbraith's unique stance as ambassador. Galbraith was engaged in diplomacy with Pakistan but was also a figure Nehru consulted before sending a letter to Kennedy, asking for American aid. By the end of two years of Galbraith's ambassadorship, he had successfully cultivated a respectful relationship with Nehru, and gained a reputation as the most influential US Ambassador to India.

### The China Factor

Kennedy's foreign policy was dominated by American confrontations with the Soviet Union, which culminated into proxy contests around the world and a constant tension known as the Cold War.<sup>i</sup> Like his predecessors, Kennedy adopted the policy of containment, which purported to stop the spread of Communism.<sup>15</sup> It was clear that Kennedy was following the Truman doctrine of containment, established by President Harry S. Truman (1947). This doctrine maintained that the United States would provide political, military, and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces. The Truman Doctrine effectively reoriented U.S. foreign policy away from its usual stance of withdrawal from regional conflicts not directly involving the United States to one of possible intervention in far-away

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<sup>15</sup> Herring, George C. (2008). *From Colony to Superpower; U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*. Oxford University Press.

conflicts.<sup>16</sup> China and India were the two giants of Asia, and during 1962, the US had expressed a clear preference for who it wanted to see win the race for primacy in Asia - and that was India.<sup>17</sup> Kennedy's predecessors had looked to other countries for alignment against communism as part of the Truman Doctrine. Kennedy had looked toward India because he valued its nationalist and democratic principles.

Kennedy's support and cordial relations with India were greatly influenced by the way India fit into the category of a democratic nation, which was under threat from an external force such as China. And in alignment with the primary statement of the Truman doctrine, during the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Kennedy provided political, military, and economic assistance to India. Kennedy's inclination towards India and method to implement the Truman doctrine was established even before his presidency. During the fourth 1960 presidential debate, which was focused on foreign policy, Kennedy stated "Are we doing enough in that area? And what about Asia? Is India going to win the economic struggle or is China going to win it? Who will dominate Asia in the next five or ten years? Communism? The Chinese? Or will freedom?"

<sup>18</sup>Later, when asked about the areas he believes the United States might take the offensive in a challenge to Communism over the next four to eight years, Kennedy says the following

Thirdly, I believe that India represents a great area for affirmative action by the free world. India started from about the same place that China did. Chinese Communists have been moving ahead the last ten years. India under a free society has been making some progress. But if India does not succeed – with her four hundred and fifty million people, if she can't make freedom work – then people around the world are going to determine – particularly in the

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<sup>16</sup> The Truman Doctrine - 1947 (*Office of the Historian - Department of State* )  
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>

<sup>17</sup> Verma, Richard " Overcoming the hesitations of History", Page 84

<sup>18</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960. Speeches and the Press. Press Secretary's Subject File, 1960. Television debates: Transcript: Fourth debate.

underdeveloped world – that the only way that they can develop their resources is through the Communist system.<sup>19</sup>

Kennedy made forthright statements about his foreign policy towards India and supportive and positive actions were taken by the US government towards India during the Kennedy term. It can be inferred from these actions that Kennedy understood and valued the democratic principles of India. He saw the country as useful support against communism and continued his alignment with the principles of the Truman Doctrine.

#### The Kennedy-Nehru Personal Factor

I suggest that the complicated personal relationship between Nehru and Kennedy constitutes an important factor in shaping the US-India relationship during the early 60s. Kennedy and Nehru provide an example of two leaders rising above personal tensions to create a successful relationship. Through the examination of their relationship and through the comparison of the US-India foreign policy during the Kennedy term with respect to the Johnson term, the influence and importance of heads of state in shaping foreign policy can be inferred.

Though the US-India foreign policy during the Kennedy term was a positive policy and a great highlight in the history of US-India relations, the heads of state who shaped this policy had a complicated relationship. During their first meeting, when Kennedy was a young senator in 1951, Nehru reportedly did not view Kennedy with a respectful mindset and seemed to have been uninterested in the conversation with frequently wavering attention. Though Kennedy was aware of this attitude, he had gone on to speak positively about India in his speeches, senatorial conferences, and the 1962 presidential debates. During their next meeting, in November 1961,

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<sup>19</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, Box 1052, "Television debates: ABC transcript: Fourth debate." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/4th-nixon-kennedy-debate-19601021>

during a state visit carried out by Nehru in Washington DC , Galbraith observed that “ Nehru simply did not respond. Question after question he answered with mono-syllables or a sentence or two... The president found it very discouraging.”<sup>20</sup> Subsequent to this visit, US-India relations were quite strained, only to be rescued by the goodwill visit of Jacqueline Kennedy, who came to India as an informal diplomat<sup>21</sup>.

Later during the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Nehru and Kennedy exchanged letters that were hidden from the public for more than 20 years, and their existence was denied by the Indian government<sup>22</sup>. In his letters to Kennedy, Nehru made an urgent plea for military assistance, specifically air transport, jet fighters, and ammunition. He wrote, “We are facing a grim situation in our struggle for survival and in defending all that India stands for against an unscrupulous and powerful aggressor<sup>23</sup>.” This was a deviation from India’s long-standing policy of non-alignment. And it is a surprising occurrence for Nehru, who prided himself on not relying on the United States or the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup>

This leads to the conclusion that both leaders, primarily Kennedy, exhibited incredible diplomacy and skill, as they managed their personal emotions, rose above them for the benefit of their countries, and stood by the beliefs of nationalism and democracy, which is what a positive relationship would provide.

These relations declined in the years after Kennedy and Nehru’s occupation of office as the subsequent leaders, President Johnson and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a cordial but rather distant relationship. Johnson was more cautious toward India than Kennedy, and Indira

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<sup>20</sup> Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal*, Page 298

<sup>21</sup> "Reel America "Jacqueline Kennedy's Asian Journey" - 1962". 7 January 2021

[https://archive.org/details/CSPAN3\\_20210107\\_002300\\_Reel\\_America\\_Jacqueline\\_Kennedys\\_Asian\\_Journey\\_-\\_1962/start/1500/end/1560](https://archive.org/details/CSPAN3_20210107_002300_Reel_America_Jacqueline_Kennedys_Asian_Journey_-_1962/start/1500/end/1560)

<sup>22</sup> Riedel, B. (2017). *JFK's Forgotten Crisis*, Page 158

<sup>23</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Countries. India: Subjects: Nehru correspondence, November 1962: 11-19. JFKNSF-111-016. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

<sup>24</sup> Galbraith, J. K. (1988). *Ambassador's journal*, Page 453

Gandhi was far more distrusting of America than her father had been.<sup>25</sup> The example of the US-India relationship during the Johnson term contrasted to the US-India relationship during the Kennedy term is relevant even in the present day, as it shows that it is possible to rise above a complicated personal relationship to create a successful and beneficial foreign policy.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my research is relevant as it focuses on the nature of US-India relations and crisis diplomacy, two concepts that are just as important in the present as they were in the past. Kennedy has undoubtedly been a major shaping factor in US-India relations. The US relationship with India declined in the years after his presidency. I suggest that Kennedy's foreign policy towards India is a framework that would be of great use to American presidents. His crisis diplomacy in the Sino-Indian war is a crucial example, as to this day India and China continue to have border disputes. During the latest dispute in 2020, which claimed the life of many Indian soldiers, Kennedy's handling of the situation all those years ago came back into focus, and his example and diplomacy model will be crucial in the forthcoming conflicts too.<sup>26</sup> My research contributes to setting forth a roadmap for modern cooperation which would be historic and beneficial for these two great nations.

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<sup>25</sup>Verma, Richard " Overcoming the hesitations of History", Page 85

<sup>26</sup> Riedel, B (2017, August 9) 'JFK Stopped a China-India War. Can Trump? The nuclear stakes are much higher' *Brookings Institution*.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/08/09/jfk-stopped-a-china-india-war-can-trump-the-nuclear-stakes-are-much-higher-now/>

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